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RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC//J-3/J-5// PRIORITY

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU//TCH// PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEUITH/TLO ANKARA TU PRIORITY

RUEHAK/TSR ANKARA TU PRIORITY

RUEHAK/USDAO ANKARA TU PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000391

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/30/2015

TAGS: PREL TU CY

SUBJECT: TURKEY'S JANUARY 24 CYPRUS PROPOSAL UNLIKELY TO
SOLVE CUSTOMS UNION ISSUE

Classified by Ambassador Ross Wilson, E.O. 12958, reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ankara's EU diplomats view positively FM Gul's January 24 proposal for mutual opening of Turkish and northern Cypriot ports and airports but see little likelihood the proposal will solve the issue of Turkey's Customs Union obligations. The GOT is indicating it will not open its ports and airports without some EU gesture for Turkish Cypriots. We need to ensure that the discussion of these EU-related issues continues -- preferably for a long time -- so that other items on the accession agenda and the UN's mediation efforts can make progress. End Summary.

Domestic Reaction Positive

¶2. (U) Turkish domestic reaction to FM Gul's January 24 proposal calling for mutual opening of Turkish, Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot ports and airports was overwhelmingly positive. Press commentary, reinforced by PM Erdogan's remarks January 31, has emphasized Turkey's positive approach on Cyprus, as contrasted with Greek Cypriot intransigence. EU nay-sayer and main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Baykal's criticism of the proposal as a declaration of intent to make concessions got little resonance.

¶3. (C) Reaction in Ankara to the Department Spokesman's statement on the proposal was positive. Journalists from mainstream Vatan and pro-government Islamist-oriented Yeni Safak newspapers expressed surprise and pleasure to Embassy IO at what they saw as a forward-leaning U.S. position. Turkey's leading all-news TV channel NTV ran a headline touting "Full U.S. Support for Turkey's Proposal." According to MFA Northeastern Mediterranean DDG Bilman, FM Gul "appreciated" the statement.

Proposal Reflects Turkish Domestic Politics

¶4. (C) Mutual opening of ports and airports, the heart of the proposal, reflects several things. One is the GOT position that equates the EU's outstanding pledge to ease Turkish Cypriot isolation with Turkey's obligation to implement the Customs Union by opening ports and airports.

Domestic political factors buttress this position: Turkey sees opening ports and airports as a "concession" that, without some EU gesture toward Turkish Cypriots, would result in a firestorm of criticism of PM Erdogan's government, including from within his own Justice and Development Party (AKP). Obtaining a quid pro quo for the Turkish Cypriots, the government believes, is essential to creating a situation in which Turkey can meet its Customs Union obligations and, more importantly, keep on track the barely initiated EU accession negotiations started last October.

EU Diplomats See No Break in Impasse

¶5. (C) While EU diplomats in Ankara see the proposal as a positive step, none expect it to resolve the issue of Turkey's implementation of its Customs Union obligations. At most, they think it may buy the GOT time, delaying a showdown over implementation until late 2006 or early 2007.

¶6. (C) EU diplomats here, even the UK and others sympathetic to Turkey, describe the crux of the matter: the EU views Turkey's obligation as contractual and binding, while it views the EU's commitment toward Turkish Cypriots as political and subject to consensus. UK FS Straw nudged closer to the Turkish position when, in January 25 remarks in Istanbul, he said "These are separate tracks but they must both work."

¶7. (C) None of our EU contacts predicts the proposal will affect the impasse over trade and aid for Turkish Cypriots or result in any other EU move toward Turkish Cypriots. They emphasize the EU's natural tendency to side with affected member states. One EU contact referred to a Cyprus impasse

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as still "the perfect pretext" for the EU's Turkey-skeptics to block accession.

¶8. (C) The one hope EU diplomats here see is that flexible and persistent Turkish diplomacy, coupled with heavy-handed ROC intransigence, may eventually lead member states to increase pressure on the ROC. The German Ambassador suggested that FM Gul's initiative may change the psychology in Europe; FS Straw's comments had reminded nations that Turkey does not bear all the onus for the Cyprus stalemate. Turkey's initiative may also lead governments to view Greek Cypriot obstreperousness more critically. And some may recognize, the German Ambassador indicated, that the EU should resist Greek Cypriot efforts to enmesh the EU too deeply in issues that should be dealt with by the UN in the context of overall settlement negotiations.

GOT in No Mood For Further Cyprus Concessions

¶9. (C) Additional flexibility will, it appears, be difficult for the GOT. PM Erdogan and his AKP government reject the idea of further unilateral concessions on Cyprus. In a January 26 meeting with Erdogan, UK FS Straw urged the PM to consider more gestures, including troop withdrawals, to win Turkey credit in the EU.

¶10. (C) According to UK PolChief Miller, Erdogan was "unbending." Erdogan replied that Turkey is already "ten steps ahead" of the Greek Cypriots and further concessions would be perceived as weakness. Claiming the EU has not kept promises to Turkey about Cyprus, Erdogan asked Straw rhetorically if the EU would put in writing the benefits Turkey would get in exchange for further concessions. Erdogan pointedly noted that he had to contend with domestic politics. When Straw urged Erdogan to bring the protocol extending the Customs Union to new member states, including the ROC, to Turkey's parliament for ratification, Erdogan replied that the European Parliament had not yet ratified it. Erdogan's public comments January 31 echoed these points.

¶11. (C) According to MFA Northeastern Mediterranean DDG Bilman, FM Gul also rejected Straw's pitch for further Turkish gestures in their January 26 meeting. According to Bilman, Gul handed Straw a list of previous Turkish initiatives on Cyprus and said Turkey was suffering from concessions "fatigue." Erdogan advisor Omer Celik likewise ruled out unilateral moves on Cyprus, including opening port and airports, in our January 26 meeting with him.

Turkish Diplomatic Efforts Continue

¶12. (C) Immediately after Gul's January 24 rollout of the proposal, Turkish diplomats demarshaled a number of foreign capitals and urged support. Gul personally called at least a couple of his EU colleagues. According to DDG Bilman, the MFA focused on EU, P-5 and OIC countries.

¶13. (C) The MFA is preparing a demarche in response to the Greek Cypriot January 25 aide memoire detailing the ROC's "utter rejection" of the Turkish proposal. The MFA's current goal is to prevent the EU from adopting a common position rejecting the Turkish proposal.

¶14. (C) An EU statement of outright rejection is unlikely. UK PolChief Miller and FirstSec Barnes predict that the UK, having expressed support for the proposal, will not allow a negative statement by the EU Presidency. They expect either a bland statement noting the proposal or no statement at all. Although Austria is a notorious Turkey-skeptic, Austrian DCM Steiner rules out any Presidency statement absent consensus. A German diplomat predicts the EU will be influenced by the UN's reaction to the proposal.

¶15. (C) Bilman says Turkey will continue to push the proposal "for some time" despite the ROC rejection. He emphasizes the proposal is not "take it or leave it," noting that part of the proposal envisions a high-level conference to "finalize" it.

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¶16. (C) Comment: Turkey has rolled out Gul's initiative well and gotten more positive commentary than seemed likely six weeks ago in the wake of Orhan Pamuk's trial. It needs to continue to be active and to promote its flexibility, including on Cyprus and non-Cyprus issues. Our diplomacy should aim to support Turkey's efforts, encourage the EU to find ways to be responsive, and urge the EU to avoid imposing a premature Cyprus litmus test that would usurp the UN's proper role in mediating a settlement of the dispute. If the discussion about fulfillment of Turkey's Cyprus-related Customs Union obligations can be dragged out while the UN re-starts its efforts and Turkey's broader accession process has a chance to gain steam, it can only be helpful. For now, the USG objective should be to help persuade the EU and the UN to take the initiative as a basis for further discussion.
End Comment.

WILSON